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Chimerica: Disorienting Politics

by Fan Yang, Kathalene Razzano, Delores B. Phillips, Mark Tseng-Putterman and Marcus Breen | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025), Positions

ABSTRACT Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's Globalization and Culture Working Group Co-Host Kathalene Razzano discuss *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements* (University of Michigan Press, 2024) with author Fan Yang, along with writer and historian Mark Tseng-Putterman. This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Marcus Breen.

KEYWORDS COVID-19, China, United States, anti-Asian hate, media, social media

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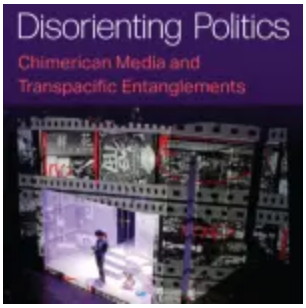

Positions
Chimerica: Disorienting Politics

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Navigating Tangled Chinese-American Relations in and beyond the Mediasphere

By Marcus Breen

Within contemporary media culture we have been "bound together in forms of commonality," as Katy Razzano notes early in the podcast response to Fan Yang's *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements*.[1] By 2025, it now appears that the powers that be in the United States would like us to

be as far apart and disentangled as possible. Stepping away from the complexity of US–Chinese interactions describes the end of the neoliberal "entanglements" that brought the US and China into alignment in the first place. Curiously, what brought us together was an ecstatic scenario of US-sponsored economic fundamentalism that was then, as Yang notes, explored in popular media texts, mostly television, then corporate finance, and finally the ocean that we share. Now, fewer entanglements appear on screens, as the era of Chinese–American interactions gives way to a continuing geopolitical crisis informed by bombastic nationalist concerns, originating in the US.

Such crises, as Stuart Hall argued, define a politics of representation that is foregrounded by cultural studies as the site of contestation in which scholarship and activism combine. Yang's book, which tracks her first twenty years of living in the US as an immigrant, intentionally blurs this site of contestation rather than bringing it into focus, identifying an era when media texts represented interactions that were less conflictual than now. During this time, the cultural struggle became foundational to an appreciation of two ideological systems: hyper-extractive capitalism in its US liberal democratic digital manifestation, against and in relation to socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Not too far from the surface, as Mark Tseng-Putterman points out, is the historical continuation of the Cold War. This history frames what he helpfully refers to as an "ideological binary," one that Americans in their ignorance struggle to get over, where liberalism and authoritarianism remain the constraining anchors of the relationship, even as media texts offer a different, more generous set of possibilities to operate outside of simplistic binaries. Such an optimistic reading gives way, as Yang says, to the "othering" of China in official media, establishing contradictions that have yet to play out.

Operating somewhat in reverse from the texts that Yang discusses, the conjuncture of the present reveals the intensification of US–China relations as a

crisis. For example, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's April 27, 2023 statement, "Renewing American Economic Leadership," marked off where the market fundamentalism of neoliberal globalization gave way to nationalistic "modern industrial and innovation strategy."[2] The plan is not for China to flourish but to "… build the world that we want:" a plan in which "China has to be willing to play its part."[3] As this new US approach takes shape, the political economy of the interactions of the US with China no longer offers evidence of the somewhat cooperative entanglements described in *Disorienting Politics*.

The reasons for the recent disarticulations are clear, as can be further explained through an appreciation of the banning of Chinese electronic equipment during the first Trump administration, to the continuing dispute over and ban of the social media platform TikTok,[4] all, so it is claimed, for national security reasons. Other reasons include the fact that US social media platforms such as Meta want and expect uninterrupted monopoly control of the digital media space.

The circulation of media texts that provide sites for interpretations of transcultural meaning collide with the US government and Jake Sullivan's macro policy statement about the US hegemon's claim to global dominance, and are reinforced by Columbia University Professor Jeffrey Sachs, who said in an interview with China CGTN on December 8, 2024: "China has been too successful from America's point of view."[5]

"Rising China," as the object of these entanglements, is well described by Yang, yet it presents for cultural studies a problematic China–US dilemma because it extends, then falls far short of, a debate about the struggle over culture that is the beating heart of cultural studies. In other words, the politics of representation will not go quietly into the night: one, because national ideological representations should be amplified within a commitment to the critical evolution of cultural studies; and two, neither US or Chinese interests want their culture to be reduced to some kind of global subservience to its opposite.

Yang examines Chimerican media co-production through liberal cultural theories that incorporate political economy in what she considers a new frame, in which representation is redefined by relationality and mutuality. The resulting politics is expressed in an interdisciplinary methodology and as such is welcomed, given its breadth. Yet it hedges its claims. There is little radicality informed by Marxism, with added uncertainty about how to address China's rise. Still, we can see that the answer to exploring entanglements, especially during the COVID-19 years, emerged from the cultural studies methodology, with questions that this podcast raises: "why this, why now," becoming, "why this particular form (of anti-Asian hate)?" Media texts go a long way to answering these questions about representation for cultural studies.

Indeed, by the end of 2024, the contest between representations of the US and China can be characterized less by relational media interactions between the US and Chinese populations and more by the bullying demands of America First white exceptionalists demanding supremacy for their culture. In 2025, in the second Trump presidency, the cultural shifts include a variety of sharp and blunt tools to conduct uneducated surgery on the apparent ideological unity of global capitalism, in an attempt to bring more of the world economy to self-interested, painfully rich American elites and their enablers.

As Yang illustrates in *Disorienting Politics*, soft power in media representations offered US media producers seductive popular media power with which to attract, deceive, and win over to the cause of American liberal democracy the Chinese masses. The hard-edged method of soft power is a matter of critical interpretation, in which the entanglements between the US and China are all-consuming, in the sense that the anti-communist ideological landscape of media production is camouflaged by an entertainment obsession endlessly tweaked by the Military–Industrial–Academic–Media complex. (In my occasional conversations with Chinese young people, it is unnerving to observe their totalized fascination with US media and culture). This adoption is observed in the

casual way in which China is referred to as “authoritarian,” while offering little insight into what this word means for the operation of the intentional demonization of Chinese nationals or their style of socialism.

Consciousness of soft power also offers a way of comprehending media texts within cross-cultural interactions: both the US and China are engaged in making texts that represent their “best” selves. The Chinese admit that their propaganda is a source of publicly beneficial education and information, while the US claims its propaganda is discourse within a perverted liberal democratic universalism that should apply to the entire world. The podcast offers welcome insights into the discursive character of the debate about entanglements, suggesting that what might have been applicable in one media moment’s context—say *House of Cards* depictions of China and the Chinese—has given way to new theories that emerge out of postcolonial studies, cultural studies, even international relations, due to shifts in US Government policy, from soft to hard power.

Unfortunately, soft power is giving way to hard, with the frightening prospect of war, initiated by geopolitical war mongering strategists in the US, who have established hundreds of military bases surrounding China, provocations in the South China Sea, the formation of AUKUS and The Quad . . . the list goes on.

In exploring “politics deeply tied to place,” as Yang says, the value of engaging with China cannot be underestimated. This throws up contradictions that offer valuable ways of engaging with the limits of the US and the Western imagination, while comprehending the curiosity of China’s development within its lengthy national evolution over 5,000 years. This means accepting that the postcolonial present will require fresh eyes and theories with which to interpret China and its relations with the US and the rest of the world. As Yang correctly suggests, “China is not able to speak for itself,” meaning that more mental effort needs to be made to comprehend its development project against a backdrop of sinophobia in the New Cold War era.

More imaginary energy is also needed to explore the way the Chinese state offers public goods that leave the US looking as if its policies are expressions of support for public destitution, as more people are thrown into poverty, debt, and drug dependence while being massaged to new heights of desire within the political fantasy of the redeemer image of Trump.

Remapping the relationship between China and the US is, as Fan suggests, a necessary project that must continue with urgency because it will build knowledge of China as the superpower, even when it is the "absent present." As a welcome development, academic engagement with China is a challenge for cultural studies. If it is to flourish as a critical program, it can inform theories of everyday life by exploring such objects as the availability of cheap "Made in China" consumerist products, as well as areas of concern in geopolitics that define the popular imaginary of "China" in the US mind. Such a focus will be political in the best sense of the meaning, of the struggle over meaning that is central to cultural studies. Such an orientation may involve a disorientating shift in focus away from US-centricity to reflect on the way that culture and now even the air that we breathe, is co-constituted by China—whether we like it or not! "Shared futures" indeed.

The imaginary of China's success can be unsettling for hegemonic interests, whose minds are persistently directed to othering prejudices by all manner of everyday media. Cultural studies can take these explorations of co-constituted media texts along with financial entanglements and shared oceans and air flows, as a welcome stimulant to moving beyond the crisis of potential conflict, to a world of peace and prosperity for all—a win–win.

Audio Transcript

[00:00:00] **Delores Phillips:** Welcome to *Positions*, the podcast of the Cultural Studies Association, sponsored and published through the open source journal, *Lateral*. *Positions* aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and the general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* journal on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes. In our first episode of Season 2, we're joined by the Globalization and Culture Working Group to discuss Fan Yang's newest book titled, *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements*, published by University of Michigan Press. Fan is joined by two special guests, Kathalene Razzano and Mark Tseng-Putterman. Enjoy the discussion.

[00:00:44] **Kathalene Razzano:** I'm Kathalene Razzano. I am chair of the Globalization and Culture Working Group for the Cultural Studies Association. I am a visiting lecturer at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in the Media and Communication Studies Department.

[00:01:01] **Mark Tseng-Putterman:** I'm Mark Tseng-Putterman. I'm a postdoctoral fellow in the Asian American Studies program at University of Pennsylvania. I'm glad to be here.

[00:01:10] **Fan Yang:** Hello, I'm Fan Yang, Professor in the Department of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County as well.

[00:01:21] **Delores:** And I'm Delores Phillips. I'm your host and the Vice President of the Cultural Studies Association; I run the African, African American, and Diaspora Studies Center at James Madison University; and I'm also Associate Professor of English.

[00:01:38] **Kathalene:** I really appreciate the way in which you are able to mobilize this idea of Chimerica and Chimerican media to reveal the way in which that China and America part of that works to mystify other ways of thinking, of living, of being, of forming solidarity with other groups around the planet, whether it be around questions of labor, whether it be around questions of environmental justice, whether it be around questions of who has the right to debt, or what is it to experience to be in debt?

[00:02:39] **Kathalene:** And so I think that the way in which you work through these examples of Chimerican media to get us to this final place where we're thinking these transnational entanglements are ones that bind us together in forms of commonality that media often work to eclipse or erase. And what you show us is that we can start to explore these in ways through conceptual frames of disorienting and this relational politics.

[00:03:23] **Fan:** Thank you so much, Katie, for that question, and I just want to quickly mention that I always credit Katie for bringing me into cultural studies from way back, and it's such a great honor to have her here to raise these insightful questions. And give me an opportunity to talk about what gave rise to the project.

[00:03:44] **Fan:** And I should just quickly mention too, that I did not coin the term "Chimerica." The term actually came from Niall Ferguson, who is an economic or financial historian. When he was using the term, he was primarily thinking of the so-called economic symbiosis between the so-called superpowers—that is, the United States and the People's Republic of China.

[00:04:09] **Fan:** But I happen to have seen this play in London back in 2012. And that play also took the name from Niall Ferguson called "Chinamerica." And at the same time, it was appropriating it to really get at some of these entanglements of China and America, especially in the twenty-first century. In some ways, I was inspired by that particular play and started to think about it at this particular moment.

[00:04:39] **Fan:** And I've also decided to use "Chimerica" as a shorthand to refer to very deep, complex entanglements, be they economic, cultural, political, and ecological. And so as I use "Chimerica" to describe these entanglements, in many ways, those entanglements can be seen—or they are made visible—through these media artifacts that I call "Chimerican media."

[00:05:09] **Kathalene:** Fan, in your previous book, which was called *Faked in China*, you actually look at the move from "made in China" to "create in China" and like the Chinese state project for that was, I was thinking of it dialectically, and you say that actually in that mix, what we find is a whole new sort of area, which was "faked in China," and I feel like you're doing a similar dialectical discussion in your new book, *Disorienting Politics*.

[00:05:48] **Fan:** One connection I do want to think about is the chapter where I talk about *Firefly*. And I again, want to thank Katie for alerting me to it because I remember back in the day when I share my observation with her that, Oh, when I watch things like *Bones* or *House*, these like main characters who are brilliant, they also oftentimes happen to speak Chinese or understand Chinese. Something's going on. And then that's when Katie said, "Oh, you should watch *Firefly*." And at that time, I didn't even know it was already a cult series. And it was quickly canceled, of course, even though it later on became a film too.

[00:06:30] **Fan:** So I engaged with that artifact in that chapter of cultural Chimerica in terms of this imagination of Chinese language as the global *lingua franca* of the future, both on the sides of American cultural producers like Joss Whedon, who uses Chinese speaking or Chinese slang in the show *Firefly* as a way for the main characters who are underdogs to form these alliances among themselves and create this intimate connections within them and really also projecting the different vision of community that was also lacking in neoliberal America, whereas, on the other hand, you also have Chinese state entities trying to imagine building a strong linguistic nation, building things like the Confucius

Institutes globally. But then that, of course, became controversial in the US due to many of the sinophobic sentiments.

[00:07:32] **Fan:** So try to bring them together again to think about what competing visions of culture emerged in these different discourses. And I think I do actually feel there's something very intriguing about *Firefly*. And I should say that when I first saw it, I also didn't quite understand. I, even as a native Chinese speaker, I'm like, what? But then realizing how genre bending it was as a show and how there are very deep layers of hegemonic, counter-hegemonic struggles, as they are associated with Chinese speaking or not. So I feel like moments like those are actually really worthy, even though they could be short-lived or very much taken up as a subcultural form. But they are still very much worth looking at, as these moments have in themselves some kind of political possibilities.

[00:08:37] **Mark:** So there are a couple valances that I want to parse that I think are particularly useful and stood out to me. The first is, coming from a Cold War historical perspective, I think what's so useful and interesting to me about this book is that it shows the ways in which Cold War American discourses about China have evolved, but also remain very durable in certain ways into the twenty-first century. I think that your book does such a great job of tracing how this ideological binary between liberalism and authoritarianism as represented by the United States and China respectively remains such an anchor for the ways that Americans think about and talk about China. And of course, that is very much an inheritance of this Cold War discourse of communism, the form of fascism or totalitarianism. And I think what your book does is it shows how in such a very different moment in which, as you're tracing the role of kind of transnational circuits of media between the US and China that are so very different from that Cold War period, that kind of these ideological paradigms remain so hardened. Even as the circulation of these media objects, in theory, increases the opportunities for connection or intimacy or understanding between American and Chinese people, I think, as you emphasize, this absent presence of China remains.

And that connects to the second point that really stands out to me, which is, I think what's really useful about your framework of Rising China is that it provides a way to think about how to theorize US–China relations through analytical inheritances of postcolonial studies of cultural studies and operationalizes an understanding of US imperialism on the one hand, and specifically these inequities between the US and China that I think continue to dictate both the material relationship between the two countries. But as you're emphasizing, this discursive context in which Chimerica is a conjoined manifestation of the US and China, but not on equal terms.

[00:11:02] **Fan:** I recall when I was finishing the book amidst the pandemic in 2020, and I realized: this is a marker of twenty years of living in the US as someone who came to the US from China in 2000. So my life is exactly split between the two. And it's very interesting to observe China or what I call this figure of Rising China from the vantage point of America, especially as we inhabit this or what I would call American media life. I think that the understanding of relational politics stems from this kind of epistemological betweenness, both geographically, but also as someone trained in cultural studies, I also have this interdisciplinary in betweenness. I'm not really bound by any approaches necessarily, but I'm also really interested in the production, circulation, and consumption of media artifacts and processes. That's where I see the possibility of approaching these objects and mining them in some ways to see what we can gather in terms of a different understanding of our beings in the world. And for me, as an interdisciplinary cultural studies scholar and someone who has been working on media and globalization, I really want to think about them together through thinking more critically of the connection between media and politics. So the way that I get at my argument is that even though, if you dig into how these media artifacts came about and how they enact these entanglements, you really get a sense of how interconnected we are as humans. But at the same time, there are ideological demarcations that mask these relations. In such a way that it really delimits our imagination of politics that extend beyond the place of the nation.

The way that I try to push forward this understanding of relational approach to politics is to argue for a greater understanding of these interconnectivities between media, people, places. That way, perhaps we can try to envision a different kind of politics that is simultaneously tied to the place, but also deeply engaged in the spaces that are created by the media.

[00:13:41] **Delores:** I was deeply intrigued by what you said on page 127–128, where you wrote, "My core argument has been that while China can make visible the numerous entanglements of the two superpowers, the ideological framing of the Chinese state as a racialized other has eclipsed the possibility to engage these entanglements as a basis for imagining politics anew." Can you speak to that very briefly?

[00:14:05] **Fan:** I think it does demand a deeper investigation. The way that I discuss in the book, for example, is to try to think about this figure, what we may call Rising China, that's a very distinctive twentieth-century phenomenon. And in some ways, it is a non-human entity, if you think about the state as not necessarily in human terms, as the category of race has historically been applied or racialization has historically applied. But at the same time, if you think about the type of figuration or configuration of that agent and actor. The COVID moment comes to mind, if you think about a rhetoric of "China virus," for example, there is this figuration of the Chinese state as an actor. So that kind of formation of the Chinese state as a subject in cultural studies, we like to use this notion of formation of the subject, and it creates the condition for it to be then objectified and dehumanized. And if you think about the often description of China as anti-human-rights or superhuman when it comes to some Olympics training, perhaps, that also corresponds to this kind of China as the nonhuman, China as the superhuman or subhuman. And then a third reason perhaps is also, as we know, in a COVID moment, there was a spike in anti-Asian racist attacks in the US, and many might argue that, well, there is a longstanding presence of "Yellow Peril," yellow perilism that is describing anti-Asian racism that is very particular about

Asian bodies, whereas phobia historically has been the term to describe a fear of China, the Chinese government. And to me, at this moment, when we have the very material presence, but also a very imaginative one, Rising China, perhaps it's really important to think about why this, why now, as the longstanding cultural studies question, a research question. Why this particular form of anti-Asian racism? Is there something quite connected to the figure of Rising China? And that is to me, an opportunity to theorize that lends a lot of analytical precision to this figure of rising China and how to manifest itself in Chimerican media. And so that's the goal here.

[00:16:51] **Mark:** I think your use of Rising China as a way to get at this contradiction between the way that China is represented as the superpower, as both dehumanized and superhuman in certain ways, and yet still operating in kind of an unequal discursive terrain in which on the context of American media or more broadly, Anglophone and Western media, China is an agent and yet also is not able to speak for itself in I think equal terms. And so this contradiction of Rising China is both indexing discourse of China as superpower, but also representing this discursive inequity, I think, is a really important way of bringing some of these frameworks of empire from postcolonial studies, from Asian studies and global Asias towards really like a contemporary analysis of US–China relations.

[00:17:50] **Fan:** Thank you so much. I want to quickly follow up. There are two things that your great comments—really appreciate that—reminded me of. The first thing was the influence of postcolonial thought on my thinking in relation to China. And I feel that, as we know, postcolonial critique does not necessarily or often have China in the framework, with the exception of scholars like Dan Vukovich, perhaps. So in some ways it's quite important to think about how postcolonial presence manifests itself on the plane of the imaginary. And that was the case of how I talked about intellectual property rights regime as this branding imaginary that has shaped the Chinese state and the Chinese cultural producers

and consumers. Whereas in this case, I really actually appreciated Mark's framing of the discursive inequity. And in the Chinese context, there's also a term (huàyǔ quán), like discursive power or discursive right. There's *House of Cards*, which is one of the chapters, that is a Netflix production that became supremely popular in China, but I have yet to see something of that kind of equivalent that comes from China and became as popular as how popular *House of Cards* was in China. So of course we could think of the more recent production of the *Three Body Problem* as something pointing to a perhaps different future, given the fact that this was one of the first globally popular Chinese sci-fi works by a Chinese author who won the Hugo Award—Liu Cixin's *The Three Body Problem*, a trilogy translated by Ken Liu, wonderfully, into English. The fact that Netflix picked it up and produced its own version, but, interestingly, remapped in ways that depart from a lot of the original narratives. So yeah, I would like to imagine perhaps there are things shifting, and in terms of this discursive inequity, but to me at the moment of my writing in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. I think it's also important to point to the very material dimension, as Mark pointed out, of China's presence. If you think about American media life, if we understand media as contents, while they are still conveyed through all these material objects that are to this day, despite the de-linking and the trade war, the majority of these gadgets are still reproduced in China bearing the label "Made in China"—sometimes "Designed in California" if it's Apple, but that label itself is a very important symbolic presence of the Chimerican entanglement that is very important to recognize if you try to think about China's presence. And try to think about what that figure might do ideologically in shaping the media landscape. We are, or I am anyway, glued to TikTok these days, just looking at how Gen Z is responding to the election shift. And I just also found it—I'm late to the game—but the fact is that TikTok is a Chinese-owned platform, where it seems to me a lot of the very exciting political interactions are taking place. And of course, not too long ago, we had this attempt to ban the platform. There is this claim that I make about media, not just as instruments for representation of politics, but as an

environment in which politics takes place. And I found it interesting that so often we are hearing the term like, the energy of the youth or the constituents that is unprecedented or hasn't been seen in years, and I was very intrigued by that. Perhaps there was some more room to develop this understanding of media as an environment for politics, like generating this energy in a way that fuels the machinery of the electorate.

[00:22:47] **Kathalene:** Are we seeing like TikTok, maybe an example of that with the rise of social media? Can politics exist without media?

[00:23:00] **Delores:** So Mark, I'm especially intrigued by the activist context in your own work that has to do with Black Lives Matter and TikTok, as we mentioned earlier. And how that activist impulse seems to travel through both of your work. So could you both comment a bit on that?

[00:23:16] **Mark:** I think from an activist or political perspective, there's so much to untangle about some of the connections that you're making about breath and its invocation in the context of Chinese environmental activism, as well as Black Lives Matter activism. For me, something that stands out is thinking about TikTok as this activist space, a transnational activist space. And from Black Lives Matter activism to more recent activism around Palestine, I think in the US there's been a very interesting discourse about TikTok that links the sinophobia and racialization of the Chinese state to just general kind of anti-progressive or anti-activist politics here in the United States. So there was a lot of talk about TikTok being this communist conspiracy to undermine young American support for Israel because of the proliferation of pro-Palestinian content on TikTok, which I think really collapses some of the intersections of what we're talking about here.

[00:24:19] **Fan:** If you go back to earlier canonical works on nation and nationalism, like Benedict Anderson, there's so much to be said about the connection between nation, imagination of the nation, and media—in his case, print media, and in our case, a multiplicity of media platforms and remediating one

another. And so this may be a point to, again, connect back to understanding media, not just as discourses and contents, but also material objects—all these possibilities for people to record George Floyd that generated the largest street protests in history. And yeah, if we bring in the understanding of the workers who also struggle in COVID moment, in iPhone factories in China, that opens up this kind of possibility of this relational political reimagination. And perhaps another dimension is the generation of e-waste of media as a very deep and troubling kind of trajectory of this explosion of personal gadgets and the constant upgrades that we somehow take for granted, the kinds of ideological work that goes into securing planned obsolescence. So, those are ways in which the framing of media as environment and the environment as media can be very productive in thinking about politics.

[00:26:19] **Delores:** And stepping very briefly outside of the American context, I'm thinking about how China is the largest supplier of personal devices across Africa, which itself has intimate ties with global circuits of e-waste.

[00:26:36] **Fan:** A really quick connection . . . I had been working on Shenzhen special economic zone in Southern China that has a company called Transsion, that supplies Africa with this top selling brand called [Tecno Mobile]. One of the interesting things on the one hand, as you say, Dolores, is that it can be understood as capital accumulation of Chinese capitalists, but on the other hand, there's an intriguing aspect to the fact that one of the reasons that these phones were so popular had to do with the fact that they take better pictures of darker-skinned individuals, just implicitly challenging the normative whiteness that shapes the algorithms, designs of globally popular brands such as iPhones. I think that's another example of the need to continue to investigate what's happening in the Afro Asian encounter. I think that the recent emergence of the framework of global Asia is a remapping, perhaps thinking about some of the physiological possibilities of connecting Asian American studies with the previous area studies understanding of Asia and try to map out some new terrain of thinking about

China or Asia as kind of these ageographical figures. So this is where Chimerica comes in as a very interesting metaphor, because in the play that I mentioned, there was one line that says it is, it's not a place on a map, but certainly a lot of us do seem to be inhabiting a place that we call Chimerica. I feel like by connecting China to the longstanding critique of racial capitalism is also a very important move in some ways, thinking about how the colonial past is remapped onto the postcolonial present, thinking about people of color globally participate in a global digital economy, from the global mining of Congo to content moderators in the Philippines and the kinds of "i-slaves" that I mentioned that produce all the "made in China" gadgets. Thinking about these moments where people of color are participating in the production of global digital economy is also, I feel like, still understudied in a way and needs to be made more visible in the study of media and globalization.

[00:29:30] **Mark:** I think what makes this so interesting is that from my vantage point, I think one could argue that China also is an absent presence within the field of Asian American studies, which I think is interesting precisely because as you were gesturing to the origins of the field in the 1960s, were very much in the context of student activism and engagements with Third Worldism and internationalism and China as a kind of revolutionary image or imaginary served a really crucial, I think, ideological and analytical role in the Asian American movement of the 1960s, as well as the birth of the field in the context of that movement. And yet, as you've been speaking to, I think it's been difficult in the twenty-first century for Asian American studies frameworks to make themselves flexible and adapt to this discourse precisely of Rising China because of the field's own counter-hegemonic political impulses—the question of how we engage with China as a contemporary state and also as a contemporary rhetorical device in American racial politics and discourse. I think that your book fits into this broader trend of kind of the transnational turn of Asian American studies, particularly vis-à-vis China in really important ways.

[00:30:56] **Fan:** Yeah, thank you so much for, again, bringing up another point that I felt is worth highlighting too. You mentioned this kind of counter-hegemonic impulse of Asian American studies and the fact that there is the undeniable economic rise of China—and one may also argue a neoliberal turn of China—despite that we can call the Beijing consensus, as opposed to the Washington consensus. At the same time, those legacies of Afro Asian alliance from the Sixties are not necessarily gone. If you also think about the rhetoric around the One Belt, One Road very controversial multiplicity of projects, sometimes connected to the state but other times not necessarily and even at times retroactively grouped under One Belt, One Road. But at the same time, there are all these contestations between the neoliberal presence of America, and China's arguably different kinds of developmental presence in places like Africa. So this is actually another project that I'm beginning to look into. And maybe that's another reminder too, that perhaps there's more to be done in connecting China to the workings of racial capitalism. In light of these more recent Afro China connections and the connection to the global Sixties around anti-white struggles both within the US and globally, I think that's very important to still think about it. Just as you mentioned Cold War lineage simultaneously evolving but at the same time holding this kind of durability, perhaps another way to think about it is these kind of counter-hegemonic anti-imperialist struggles from the Sixties, in what ways do they also have a continual presence in the twenty-first century? That's a very worthy question to look into as well.

[00:33:31] **Kathalene:** Fan, I think this actually might be a good turn to think about your concept of fiscal Orientalism and thinking about the work that does.

[00:33:44] **Fan:** It was interesting to think about this Rising China figure in relation to the longstanding framework of Orientalism. I made the case that even though they're still very much used in thinking about *Orientalism* by Edward Said, talking about representation. But here you do have both in reality and imaginarily a figure that is more powerful than the American self and, at the same time, the action of

this figure is not to be dismissed, even though in this chapter, I talk about this in terms of a fiscal Orientalism, acknowledging that the framework of Said still is quite useful. But later on, I move on to talk about perhaps China here is not a preformed object to be represented in these media. Instead, I theorize it as a figure co-constituted with Chinese Chimerican media. That is a different way to approach this figure that does not reduce it to something that's already static and there to be represented. This is my attempt to move beyond the representational framework and try to think about this co-constitution of agents in media production and the media artifacts that make them visible.

[00:35:23] **Fan:** The fact that when you depict China in those terms, it also delimits the ways in which American politics can imagine the role of the state, particularly limiting the possibility for the state to be a figure that is meant to secure the public good. If you hear right-wing politicians routinely talk about government spending and not wanting to become like China, that kind of rhetoric is performing the ideological work to argue that the state should be limited in becoming an agent of public good. That's an important connection. That is something we should continue to observe.

[00:36:23] **Kathalene:** I'm also wondering if we can talk about the very first term on the cover of your book, this disorienting. So I'm thinking "disorienting" as being disoriented, right? Dizzy, unsteady, but also dis-*orienting*.

[00:36:43] **Fan:** As you've rightly pointed out, there is a pun. Several layers, I would say . . . or one is, as you pointed out, there is a dizzying effect perhaps with this figural formation of Rising China in a sense that I'm not sure exactly how to operate as Mark also earlier pointed out, perhaps the impact on Asian American studies.

[00:37:13] **Fan:** That is another example to think about. How do we grapple with this rising figure? And I also found it really illuminating to go back to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, where she talks about the operation of racism, how that is

tied to this kind of orientation of the body. So if you think about that layer, the Fanonian encounter with someone who recognized him as a Black man. It also had this segment where they talked about this encounter people from other places, when they encounter racism, say, during COVID and high Asian racism, it's oftentimes predicated on this feeling of disorientation, feeling that they're out of place; they're not supposed to be here. I think there's a very highly precise way to think of this disorienting effect of racism on people of color who are perceived to be from elsewhere and should go back to that elsewhere. At the same time, Ahmed also had this other layer—which I really appreciate and connecting that to the play that I analyze—is that when we think about place-based politics and the space that is created by trans-Pacific media, perhaps that also opens up the possibility of a environment for politics that is not necessarily tied to the ground of the nation, but just like the ocean, the Pacific provides a fluid environment for regrounding, so to speak, of our imagination of politics, tying back to this notion of relationality. Perhaps these moments, for example in my conclusion, when I talk about the "I can't breathe" slogan in the Black Lives Matter movement and the kinds of deadly air pollution that you observe in China due to its status as the world's factory. These very disparate experiences of not being able to breathe by people of color can be brought into a productive relational understanding to create this new ground—so called "ground"—for rethinking politics. I feel like there is the dialectical understanding of disorientation at work in addition to rethinking the connection between China and Orientalism as well. Thank you for that.

[00:40:19] **Delores:** So the displacement of the Orient as a space that is simply represented, as you said very early in your book, you're trying to peel away from this concentration on simple representation to move toward relationality, mutuality, and yet tension. I think that you said that the title works on these different layers are very much complimentary, as well as thinking about this affect, dizzying kind of effect, of disorientation. Might we now discuss the concluding chapter and the ultimate conclusion that you draw, especially with breath and ecological entanglement.

[00:41:00] **Fan:** This is the chapter that I'm most curious to hear folks' reaction to because it was written in the pandemic, just when we were returning to aspired normality. This notion of breathing that was so denaturalized—breathing together, I should say—in that moment, as we were just regaining that capacity to breathe together had this impact on me, trying to think about, is there something to be done about air, something that perhaps is another kind of medium. If we can relate to how scientists talk about the air pollution that can travel from China back to the US West coast, is that air Chinese air? Or is it because of the kinds of mass production of products in China for American companies that generated that air pollution that makes that air Chimerican air? I found it interesting to think about this category of air and then jump from there to think about the role of the state in tackling the climate crisis that we are arguably encountering in a more intensified manner, and some people have called a pandemic as a dress rehearsal for the oncoming climate crisis. Many in the environmental studies world would involve the two biggest polluters on the planet, namely China and America, how the states of these two nations can be very important in addressing that kind of crisis. I think, for me, in addition to thinking about the trans-Pacific air as Chimerican media as a way to talk about the ecological entanglement of the two superpowers, it also brings the notion of relational politics back down to form the configuration of the state. There's this concept of the green state that some political scientists have presented as a potential outlook. But of course, at this moment, even though in China there's a so-called ecological civilization official policy, there's still very much the notion of de-linking that is on the minds of a lot of policymakers on both sides of the Pacific. So to what extent can we imagine a relational politics being mapped onto these state formations?

[00:44:18] **Mark:** You mentioned that people have said the pandemic is perhaps a dress rehearsal for confronting the climate crisis, and I think if it is, we're all in a lot of trouble because from my vantage point, I feel that the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic was so circumscribed by geopolitical antagonism to China and one that not only was staked to a critique or demonization of the Chinese

state response but one that really lacked a lot of simple human empathy for Chinese people. I remember myself as a Chinese American in the early months of when here in the US, we were just starting to talk about what is this new virus that they found in China? Oh, Wuhan is locked down. There was very little, I think, solidarity, very little empathy. And I remember seeing one of my friends on Facebook—to bring in another media example—changed their profile to have one of those frames that Facebook puts out when different kinds of events or crises happen and put a filter on their profile photo that said, my heart is with Wuhan or something like that. I remember being so moved and also sad to see that because it was such a solitary expression of identification and solidarity with Chinese people, whereas I think if COVID had unfolded in a different country, we would have seen a very different type of response, both popularly and at the state level. I think that your call for the more solidaristic understanding of our shared futures is one very moving to me personally, and I think also really emphatically important for confronting these global crises that are so intertwined.

[00:46:16] **Delores:** Thank you again, Mark, Katy, and Fan for sharing your thoughts on this engaging book and its vital contribution to media studies, cultural studies, and Asian studies. Be sure to add Fan's book, *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media, and Transpacific Entanglements*, published by University of Michigan Press, to your library. We'd also like to thank the entire *Positions* editorial and production team, along with our co producers Elaine Venter and Mark Nunes, whose work makes these episodes possible. And we also thank you, our audience, for your time and attention today. If you haven't already, make sure to subscribe to our podcast and join us for the next episode of *Positions*, where we will tackle other essential and engaging topics in cultural studies.

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Notes

1. Fan Yang, *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements* (University of Michigan Press, 2024). ↩

2. Jake Sullivan, "Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Renewing American Economic Leadership at the Brookings Institution," April 27, 2023. Available at: *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-renewing-american-economic-leadership-the < https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-renewing-american-economic-leadership-the> . ↩

3. Sullivan, "Remarks." ↩

4. As of publication, the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act remains in place, effectively banning TikTok in the United States. However, an executive order issued by President Trump suspends enforcement of that act for 75 days. "Application of Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act to TikTok," January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/application-of-protecting-americans-from-foreign-adversary-controlled-applications-act-to-tiktok < https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/application-of-protecting-americans-from-foreign-adversary-controlled-applications-act-to-tiktok> . ↩

5. "Jeffrey Sachs on 'China Collapse' Theory," *Global Insights on China's Economy*, CGTN, December 8, 2024, https://fb.watch/xjuSm3SqG3 < https://fb.watch/xjuSm3SqG3> . ↩

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